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AUTHOR Schwartz, Lita Linzer
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ABSTRACT

The paper offers recommendations for an ethnic studies curriculum at the elementary school level which would be interdisciplinary in nature and integrate the basic skills of reading, writing, and critical thinking. In the social studies, for example, concepts of cultural diversity and universality can be presented in simple form in the early grades and re-introduced in more complex form in the later grades. Specific techniques for investigating values, beliefs, heritage, problems, and contributions of ethnic groups include inviting leaders of ethnic groups in the community to speak; assigning projects which focus on a group's history, language, or values; visiting community groups in action such as a Greek Orthodox bazaar; conducting a lesson in a foreign language so that students can develop a sense of what it must be like for an immigrant who does not speak English; inviting foreign students from universities; developing a multilingual vocabulary of greetings and common school and home words; and developing multi-media programs. (KC)

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Minority (Ethnic) Studies in the Elementary Grades

Lita Linzer Schwartz
Penna. State University
Ogontz Campus

SP 012 293

Minority (Ethnic) Studies in the Elementary Grades

The school, as an agency of society, has a special function and obligation: besides teaching children the majesty of diversity and individualism of human beings, it provides the one site where all groups can mingle and communicate with each other. Children at very young ages can be taught to appreciate the value of group differences and ethnic characteristics, to be sensitive to others' feelings, and to improve their relations with members of different groups. It is imperative, in fact, that they be taught these things in the early grades, for research studies have shown that attitudes toward other peoples are firmly established by eighth grade. We cannot wait to teach ethnic studies in secondary school.

In any program designed to help children appreciate cultural diversity and to develop their understanding of those who are culturally different from themselves, it is important that every opportunity be taken to integrate basic skills of reading, writing, and critical thinking. Ethnic studies should not be a separate subject in the curriculum, divorced from these basics. Indeed, to mount a meaningful multicultural curriculum, several appraoches can be employed concurrently. Without disturbing the major areas of the social studies curriculum, for example, the primary grades can continue to focus on family and local community relationships, but in a more comparative way. It can be shown, even at this level, that every cultural or ethnic group structure has some unique features and some that are common to most groups. At the intermediate level, more emphasis could be placed on cultural diversity and similarity in other fields. In conjunction with these emphases, related materials could be introduced into the studies of literature, music, art appreciation, drama, and

language arts. In the past decade, for example, we have found that elementary-level readers and social studies texts have increasingly taken a multicultural approach in their content. To design and implement an effective multicultural program, however, teachers themselves must be knowledgeable and flexible.

Following the scheme of Bruner's spiral curriculum, concepts from the several disciplines within the social studies can be presented in simple form in the early grades, and re-introduced in gradually more complex modes in the higher grades. The concepts of cultural diversity and universality, for example, can begin with pre-schoolers describing themselves and then finding the ways in which they are similar to and different from their classmates. It can be pointed out that a single child may be like several other children in one characteristic (e.g., hair color), part of another group in another characteristic (e.g., eye color), and part of still a different group in a third characteristic (e.g., preferred games), but that all the children can and do take part in a variety of activities together. At a slightly higher grade level, diversity and similarity may focus on ways in which birthdays and holidays are celebrated, always emphasizing that difference does not imply "better" or "worse."

By the middle and upper elementary grades, the themes of multicultural education will be well-established and can be demonstrated in variations among ethnic and racial groups in this country. Immigrant children in the class can be encouraged to serve as resource persons for various projects. This will serve the dual purpose of increasing their constructive interaction with peers and of enhancing their self-concept in a still-strange

environment.

No textbook or curriculum can possibly include all cultural, ethnic, and racial groups, so that some representative selectivity will be necessary. It is a fact, however, that some groups, especially in urban areas, may be especially predominant in a specific school's population. Recognition of the cultural mores, unique and universal beliefs, heritage, problems, and contributions to the international, national, and local scenes of such predominant groups should be part of the curriculum in that school. Specific techniques to be used, for the special group as well as others studied, might include:

1. invitations to leaders of the ethnic groups in the community to serve as resource persons for all the children in the school, to speak to the teachers and staff as well as the pupils in order to increase understanding and appreciation of their group's culture;

2. assignment of projects in language arts and social studies that focus on the group's history, language, and values, possibly resulting in custom-made instructional materials where commercially published materials are sparse or non-existing. This might be true, for example, for West Indians, modern Greeks, Vietnamese, Iranians, and Zambian-Rhodesians, among other groups. The development of library skills in connection with such projects obviously enables the teacher to meet two educational goals at the same time. The reports of each student can be duplicated and distributed to all members of the class so that everyone has a "text" on the group.

3. Integration of the disciplines should be encouraged and utilized more fully. Literature, history, geography, and even anthropology, can

illustrate and expand cultural studies. Maps, both physical and pictorial, show the areas from which different groups came, and where they have settled in the United States. History lessons offer the story of a nation - for example, China. Poetry and literature selections stress the stories and myths of that culture, examine family life and structure showing their relationship to the geography and economy of the country (e.g., the rice culture), and to other aspects of Chinese civilization. In the United States, the teacher can describe the transmission of Chinese culture to a new setting, the adversities and biases the Chinese faced here, the conflicts between "old" Chinese immigrants and "new" ones, and the ways in which Chinese culture flourishes here toady. In other words, basic skills and all the disciplines can be interwoven and utilized effectively to teach any group culture that the school or teacher wishes to emphasize. Art and music can and should, of course, also contribute to this content.

4. Wherever possible, children should visit community groups in action. Some examples are a trip to an Italian market, a Greek Orthodox bazaar, a Ukranian folk festival, a Chinatown cultural center, a Puerto Rican celebration of Three Kings' Day, or whatever community activity is available. Discussion of the source of particular customs and other cultural aspects of the event should both precede and follow such field trips.

5. Simulations, a popular classroom technique, should always be used in conjunction with interdisciplinary studies. For instance, a teacher might conduct a lesson entirely in a foreign language, using both speech and writing. The children can then develop a sense of what it must be like

for an immigrant child who does (or did) not speak English to attend school here. If the teacher cannot do this, a local resident who can might be recruited for the task.

6. If there is a local college or university nearby, foreign students might be invited to visit and speak with the children. They can tell about their countries' customs, educational patterns, and their own experiences in adapting to American practices.

7. Development of a multilingual vocabulary in terms of greetings and words used commonly in the school and home can be used to enrich the study of language arts, and as preparation for later foreign language study. Discovering the common roots of many of these words can serve as a basis for studying the different national groups subsumed under a great language umbrella. An example of such a study is the research into the question of why Finnish resembles medieval Hungarian when the countries are so far apart geographically. This could be a challenging project for an academically gifted student. Furthermore, the study of "foreign" words that have become part of the American vocabulary should underline the contributions of various cultural groups to this country.

8. Again, for gifted students, special projects might include studying the role of women in different cultures, or child-rearing practices in various groups - at an elementary level, of course, and similar delimited comparative studies.

9. An ancillary means of studying about other countries can be the use of stamp collections, since stamps portray principal figures and events in a nation's history. Different coinage and monetary systems can be used as well, for mathematics and other subjects.

10. It goes without saying that supplementary audio-visual materials are valuable adjuncts to multicultural programs. They must be solidly integrated into the program, however, and not substitute for more basic teaching techniques.

We agree with Richard Gambino's thesis that:

> Ethnic studies programs should aim to build a cultural pluralism that is genuinely creative, rather than a pluralism of isolated groups, ignorant and callous toward others. Above all, ethnic studies should adhere strictly to the highest standards of scholarship in research for truth that are absolute requirements for true education, in the best sense of the word.

The recommendations we have made are in no way the solely correct responses to the need for a multicultural curriculum. What we are trying to accomplish is to bring to the present educational scene a sense of what is possible. Remaking society, destroying class lines, eradicating poverty, and creating instant educational equality cannot be achieved by the schools alone and certainly are beyond the skills of the finest teacher as an individual. However, each teacher can contribute to the improvement of intergroup attitudes and relationships which are positive moves toward such goals.

We believe that innovative, enriched, multi-media programs can contribute effectively and substantially to multicultural education. We believe that these programs must be an intergral part of the school day

and not relegated to an hour or two a week as a separate, add-on subject. Furthermore, we urge most strongly that mastery of the basic skills of language and communication - reading, writing, and speaking - be restored to their position of prime priority in education and be incorporated into this multicultural curriculum. If the child cannot read and comprehend what he is assigned to read, or cannot express his feelings and knowledge clearly in speech and writing, the recommended activities will have diminished effectiveness. The knowledge that he has these competencies will contribute to the child's positive self-concept as a person worthy of respect by others, surely an important goal in education.

We have stressed the need for realistic multicultural education because we believe that it creates respect for each cultural heritage within the child and his peers, that it promotes respect for differences while recognizing similarities, and that it helps to maintain the integrity and self-respect of every child. There are a number of resource books that can help the teacher develop ability-appropriate activities to meet these goals. The creation and implementation of a multicultural curriculum places a heavy responsibility on teachers and curriculum specialists, but it is one worth carrying out well in our culturally pluralistic society.